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Chinatown Kolkata

A Photographic Journey

Rafeeq Ellias

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A bird does not sing because it has an answer.
It sings because it has a song.

– *Chinese Proverb*

A VERY SHORT HISTORY OF THE INDIAN CHINESE

Rafeeq Ellias

Sometime in January or February each year, on the first day of the new moon, India reaffirms its magical diversity as the country's tiniest minority celebrates Chinese New Year. Nobody knows the precise size of the Indian Chinese population: estimates suggest less than 5000 of them live in Kolkata and perhaps another 5000 in the rest of India.

It was, but of course, a very enterprising and hardworking trader who first came to Bengal over 200 years ago; Yang Daijang from Guandong, who, in a moment of unusual generosity from the British received a grant of 650 *bighas* of land just 30 km from Kolkata, in return for the gift of a shipload of tea! Yang, called Atchew by the British, began a sugar factory and brought Chinese labour to the port city that came to be known as Achipur.

My own connection with the Chinese is considerably less ancient but does go back several decades. There were Chinese classmates in my school in Bombay, a Chinese newspaper three houses away from mine in Bombay Central, a Chinese school slightly further away in Agripada, a Chinese temple near Dockyard station, even a small Chinatown (with a lone and somewhat forlorn Chinese restaurant) on Sukhlaji Street behind Alexandra Cinema, that used to light up at Chinese New Year.

There were Chinese seamen, carpenters and deck hands. Some passing through the city, others on extended stays. And then there were dentists with smiles painted on their doorways, shoe shops in Colaba near the Taj Mahal Hotel, the earliest beauty parlours, even hawkers who peddled silks from China. They were Hakka, Cantonese, Hupei. Many had lived in India for several generations, their ancestors having sailed across from Hong Kong to Calcutta and Bombay, from one British colony to another. Some even had Indian passports.

That was all very long ago; the Indo-China war changed everything one morning in 1962. My classmates stopped coming to school, the Chinese school and the newspaper were closed with policemen posted outside. The occasional Chinese hawker on the bicycle was beaten up by angry crowds. Bombay's Chinatown never celebrated new year again.

I knew too little then. But years later my love affair with a Bengali girl led me to Kolkata and to breakfast on Sunday mornings in its shrinking Chinatown. Two actually: one in the heart of the city, around Sun Yat Sen Street near Bow Bazaar and Bentinck Street, not far from the Esplanade; the other in Tangra where the leather tanneries once were and have now given way to glitzy Chinese restaurants. Over the years, I took many thousand stills, met many families. The barriers slowly melted away.

I realised that the war in 1962 was a defining moment for the Chinese in India, almost like partition has been for the people of the sub-continent. In its aftermath, many Chinese were picked up by the police in various Indian cities and especially in the border towns of Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal. They were interned in camps in Deoli, Rajasthan; their property confiscated and auctioned. Others were deported by sea or simply pushed over the borders. The rest awaited the dreaded midnight knock. All very reminiscent of the experience of the American Japanese on America's West Coast after Pearl Harbour.

A wave of migration began, principally to Canada, but also to Australia, Europe, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. But the ties remain. They form their own communities there with their own "Indian Chinese Associations", run "Indian Chinese" restaurants, enjoy annual picnics together, celebrate weddings and birthdays with Bollywood songs and tandoori chicken. And yes, they tend to marry within the "Indian Chinese" community. Sharing the multiple identities of being Indian, Bengali perhaps, and Chinese of course, even as they find themselves twice displaced.

That story prompted my documentary "The Legend of Fat Mama" for BBC World, a journey of nostalgia in search of a woman who once made the most amazing noodles in Kolkata's Chinatown. The film, broadcast in over 200 countries in 2006, generated a groundswell of interest in the community and its history. It triggered serious academic interest (two students, one in Montreal and the other in London, are currently engaged in studying the diaspora for their PhDs); two major symposia on the subject; a website of the Indian Chinese; and at least three more documentary films being independently produced.

About time we reflect on our treatment of one of India's tiniest minorities, acknowledge the excesses committed in the aftermath of the 1962 war and redeem ourselves as a humane, compassionate democracy that believes in pluralism.

LAST DRAGON DANCE IN CHINATOWN

By Kwai-Yun Li
From The Palm Leaf & Other Stories

I met Raindrop on a hot summer day in the unpaved courtyard at the back of our apartment building, between Sun Yat Sen Street and Chattawalla Gully. I was covered in mud. She was in spotless white shorts.

Chattawalla Gully was in the older part of Calcutta, where decaying buildings with peeling paint and missing windowpanes lined narrow cobble-stoned streets; there was no electricity and the whole street shared a tap that dribbled water only six hours each day. People lived in crowded one-room apartments, sometimes eight or more to a room.

A row of shops out on Sun Yat Sen Street backed onto the courtyard. That day the monsoon rain had flooded the courtyard. I sat on a brick, my bare feet in the muddy water. I made little paper boats and sailed them, one at a time, in the temporary pond. A mosquito buzzed and I swatted at it, leaving a smear of mud on my face.

A girl, her long black hair pulled into an untidy ponytail, stood by the back door of the newly opened bookshop. She looked like she could be five years old, my age.

I was bored. I wanted someone to play with, and there she stood, her eyes unfocused, her face wet.

"Hey," I called out.

She looked at me forlornly and wiped her face.

"Why are you crying?"

"I am not crying!"

"Oh, yeah, why is your face wet?"

"Its raindrops, stupid."

I looked at my muddy dress, then at her clean white shorts. "Want to sail boats with me, Raindrop?" I said.

Raindrop later told me that she missed her mother, who had died two months before. Raindrop's father, Mr. Tai, had owned a restaurant in Shillong, a hill station near the Indo-Chinese border. After her mother's death, her father sold the restaurant, moved to Calcutta, and bought the bookshop.

For the next four months, Raindrop and I spent many hours in the small courtyard. We played in muddy puddles, built mud hills on ant paths, chased chickens, and left tracks of mud in our apartments. Soon the monsoon was over. The sky cleared and the weather cooled.

On a warm February evening, a week before Chinese New Year, my mother had let me stay at Raindrop's place. The bookshop, like its neighbours, was long and narrow. Mr. Tai had his living quarters at the back of the shop, behind a curtain. Raindrop and I lay on our stomachs on her bed, a magazine in front of us. It was the Chinese New Year edition of the *People's Monthly*. We could hear Mr. Tai and his friend, Mr. Mo, arguing on the concrete bench outside the shop, smoke from their cigarettes drifting down to where we lay.

"How can you say that the Communists are good for China?" Mr. Mo said.

Mr. Tai replied, "Before Chairman Mao, the people in my village could not read or write. Chairman Mao opened the first school in my village. Now all the children can learn to read and write. What is better than reading and writing?"

"Ah, Bookworm, do you know that you would be regarded as a capitalist pig in China? You have a shop, your own property. What's more important, you will get into trouble with the Indian government if you are not careful."

"Look," said Mr. Tai, "I agreed with the Chinese Communist government's views about China. Why should the Indian government worry about what I think about China?"

I said to Raindrop, "I heard Mr. Chen argue about Mao and Chiang with his friends yesterday."

Raindrop turned the pages of the *People's Monthly*, stopped at a page and pointed, "This is Chairman Mao."

I put my head on Raindrop's shoulder and squinted. "He looks like Blackie when it stole the piece of meat from the cook."

Blackie was the resident dog of the restaurant, Feroz's, six doors down from Mr. Tai's bookshop. The day before, Raindrop and I had been playing in the courtyard, beside the cook who sat cross-legged on a coconut mat chopping meat. We had laughed with delight when Blackie snuck up, snatched a piece of meat, and swallowed it before the

cook could stop him. "But I'm sure he's nice. Chairman Mao, I mean," I said.

"Of course he is nice. He is nicer than Chiang Kai Shek. Father said Chairman Mao is a good man." Raindrop pushed my head off her shoulder.

"My brother says they are both wicked men," I said. "Lots and lots and lots of people died because Mao and Chiang fought and fought and fought."

"No. Lots and lots and lots of people died because Chiang Kai Shek is a wicked, wicked, wicked man," Raindrop shouted. "My father said so."

"My brother says they are both wicked, and my brother knows everything," I shouted back.

"Children, what's the matter?" Mr. Tai walked in.

Raindrop and I glared at each other.

Mr. Tai looked at Chairman Mao's picture and sighed. "Little girls should not worry about such things."

He closed the magazine and sat down on the bed. "Would you like me to tell you a story?"

"Yes, please," we said. We loved Mr. Tai's stories. I lay on my side and hugged a pillow.

Mr. Tai thought for a moment. "Well, next week is Chinese New Year," He sat down at the edge of the bed. "I'll tell you what I did when I was five years old. The same age as you two are now. My family lived in a small village in Shantung. A month before the New Year, Mother sent my brother and me to the market..."

We fell asleep before Mr. Tai could finish his story.

On Chinese New Year's day, Raindrop and I stood on the concrete bench outside the bookshop to watch the parade. Mrs. Mo said we looked like twins, and pretty, like the dolls in the toy shop display window. I wore my pink dress with tiny red flowers and white socks and shoes. Raindrop had an identical dress to mine, but her shoes were pink.

A month ago, Mr. Tai had asked Mother to get a new dress for Raindrop for the New Year when she was getting mine. Mother took Raindrop and me to New Market, and she let us select the material for our new dresses, and we had them made by the tailor in Brick Maidan. The tailor showed us pictures of dresses, and we chose the one with a lace collar and red buttons in the front.

Mr. Mo waved a long bamboo pole from his second-storey window. A piece of lettuce and a red packet containing money were tied to the end of the pole, followed by a long string of firecrackers. Further down Sun Yat Sen Street, drums boomed, gongs clanged, and flags fluttered as the Chinese New Year parade got closer.

First came the lion dancers. My seventeen-year-old brother, Chien, marched with the group from Bentinck Street, the shoe district. "Who's that good looking guy?" A girl standing

next to me whispered to her friend.

Chein wore loose bright-red trousers with black piping, and a red kung-fu-style robe with black facing, and black kung-fu shoes, and his long black hair was held back by a red headband. I laughed and jumped up and down and waved my arms. Chein waved back. The girl beside me nudged her friend. They giggled and waved.

The lions stopped by Mr. Mo's restaurant, stood on its hind legs and pawed the air. It jumped and landed close to a wall, then lifted a hind leg and pretended to spray. We clapped and laughed. The drumbeat slowed. The lion's tail wagged and its rump wriggled. Three boys standing by the Chan Grocery store whistled. The beat softened. The lion pivoted, stopped, and bowed at the cheering crowd, four times, once in each direction. The beat sped up. The lion reared.

Mr. Mo's son leaned out from the window above the restaurant. He pulled the pole in, lit the fuse on the firecrackers, then extended the pole out again to dangle the firecrackers over the lion. The lion dance group formed a human pyramid, the man carrying the lion's head standing on top. The lion's head reached out for the package. The beat quickened, the human pyramid wobbled, and the crowd shouted, "Look out!" The firecrackers sputtered and exploded; Raindrop and I put our fingers to our ears. Smoke swirled around the lion dancers.

Raindrop and I clapped and cheered as the lion opened its mouth wide and swallowed the red package from Mr.Mo's pole. The pyramid disintegrated and the drumbeat slowed down to a rhythm of single beats. The lion now faced the restaurant's main door and bowed three times. The drumbeat picked up tempo, the lion shook its head and sashayed on to the next shop.

Now the dragon glided by. Its green and red scales flashed in the sunlight, its red and gold head floated above the smoke, and its green tail swung from side to side as if to sweep in the new year. Two men held the dragon head high on bamboo poles, following a third man wearing a pink smiling mask and a red kung-fu robe, who ran ahead with a basket-ball-sized bamboo globe covered with red and gold cloth. Red ribbons tied to the ball fluttered as the man waved the ball under the dragon's nose. The dragon's head dipped and soared, following the ball, its body undulating behind it, up and down, side to side, as though riding the waves of the sea. The dragon's red beard quivered. The big drum, carried by four men, boomed. Raindrop and I clapped.

The man with the ball somersaulted and rolled under the dragon. The dragon's head followed. It looped under its own body, over and over. Firecrackers flashed and smoke

drifted around the dragon, like a sheer curtain over a rainbow. Then the dragon uncoiled and floated away.

"Isn't it the most beautiful thing?" Raindrop draped her arm around my shoulder.

"Yes." I laughed and hugged her.

The lion and dragon groups either waved the Chinese Nationalist or the Chinese Communist flags. The groups waving Nationalist flags did not come to Mr. Tai's shop, they went to Mr. Chan's grocery shop. The group waving Communist flags did not visit Mr. Chan's, they came to Mr. Tai's. I asked Mr. Tai why this was so.

"I don't know," Mr. Tai said. "Do you like the dragon dance? In Shantung, we only had the dragon dance at Chinese New Year, while where Mr. Mo comes from in Southern China, they had only the lion dance. We are lucky to have both in Calcutta."

A week later, Raindrop and I were sitting on the window sill in our apartment. We had the latest *People's Monthly* on our laps. Mother and Mrs. Liu stood with their backs to us. Mrs. Liu owned the peanut shop next door to the bookshop.

"The police arrested Ah Lo and Ki Shan yesterday, for disturbing the peace," Mother said to Mrs. Liu. "They had a fight in the market place."

"Why?" Mrs. Liu asked. "I thought they were good friends."

"Well..." Mother looked worried. "It was the silly Communist and Nationalist thing. It's getting out of hand. This is the third fight this week over stupid politics."

Mrs. Liu sighed. "There is going to be trouble. Big trouble. You know that the police came to Mr. Tai's. They asked him all sorts of questions."

"Oh. I didn't know. When was that?"

"Two days ago. The police thought that Mr. Tai was a spy for the Chinese Communist."

"Ahya. I told Mr. Tai not to speak out in favour of the Communist. He never listens."

Mother turned and saw us. She told us to go and play in the bookshop.

A month after the New Year celebration, the Indian police came for Mr. Tai. It was night time, and harsh voices in the courtyard had woken me up. I thought I heard Raindrop's cries. Mother came and patted me and said, "Go back to sleep. Everything is alright." I snuggled against her and went back to sleep.

In the morning, I ran over to Mr. Tai's shop. Strange men were ransacking the shop, scattering books on the floor. They overturned the bookshelves, dragged drawers out of the desk, pulled the beds apart. They threw books, clothing, pots and pans into large cartons and carried them to a truck parked outside. I could not see Mr. Tai or Raindrop. Mother hurried over, picked me up, and carried me back to our apartment.

"Mother, where is Raindrop? What are those men doing in Mr. Tai's shop?"

"Shhh. Mr. Tai and Raindrop have gone back to China. The police took them to the dockside last night."

"But Mother! Raindrop is my best friend. She can't go to China."

"Hush. She is gone. You will find a new friend. Lots of new friends. I promise."

Over the next few months, the Indian government deported numerous Chinese whom they suspected as Communist sympathisers. The Chinese government sent two passenger ships up the Hooghly and moored them at the International Wharf. By the end of 1956, over a thousand Chinese had left Calcutta. The following year, the Chinese New Year parade was much smaller and there was no dragon dance.

For many days I haunted the former bookshop and the courtyard looking for Raindrop. An Indian tailor took over Mr. Tai's shop; he told me not to stand at his back door and block the light.

One day, I found a copy of the *People's Monthly* under a chair in the courtyard. Mother told me to throw it away, for we might get into trouble with the police. But I hid the magazine under my bed.

Years later, I found the *People's Monthly* in a shoe box. Chairman Mao's face smiled up at me, by now streaked with mold and mouse droppings. I tore up the magazine and used it to start the coal fire for the evening meal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kwai-Yun Li writes evocatively of her childhood in Kolkata in the fifties and sixties. Her Hakka parents came to Kolkata, India from Moi-Yen, China. She grew up in Chattawalla Gully near Sun Yat Sen Street, in the old part of the city, and came to Canada after her marriage. Her book 'The Palm Leaf Fan & Other Stories' is published by Tsar Books (www.tsarbooks.com) in Canada.

SATNA MADCARRIE

Outside a Chinese restaurant in Chattawalla Gully.

SATNA ROAD CARRIER
Office:-31,GIRI BABU LANE,3rd FLOOR
Godown:-14/3,CHHATAWALA GALLY CAL-700
Our Branches at REWA-SATNA-KATNI-JABALPU
INDORE-BHOPAL-RATLAM-KHANDWA-UJJAIN-GWALIO

Tiretti bazaar on Sun Yat Sen Street in the heart of the city, locally known as 'cheenapara'.

Breakfast on a Sunday morning in Tiretti Bazaar. Following doublespread: the trusted rickshaws still ply here.

Tiretti Bazaar's very own sidewalk cafe. Following doublespread: enjoying the winter sunshine.

SECRET RICHES

भारत की कम्युनिस्ट पार्टी
(मार्क्सवादी)
पश्चिम बंगाल राज्य
का २१वां सम्मेलन
९-१२ फरवरी २००५
कामरेड शांति घटक मंच (नजरुल मंच) | कामरेड ए के गोपालन नगर (कनरहट्टी, उत्तर २४ परगना)
खुला अधिवेशन
१२ फरवरी २००५
ब्रिगेड परेड मैदान

ہندوستان کی کمیونسٹ پارٹی (مارکسی)
مغربی بنگال کی ۲۱ ویں صوبائی کانفرنس کے موقع پر
کھلا اجلاس
بروز
بریگیڈ پریڈ میدان
مقرر
عوام سے شرکت کی اپیل ہے

Sun-dried prawn wafers and other snacks.

In Tangra, guarding the gates to the sauce factory!

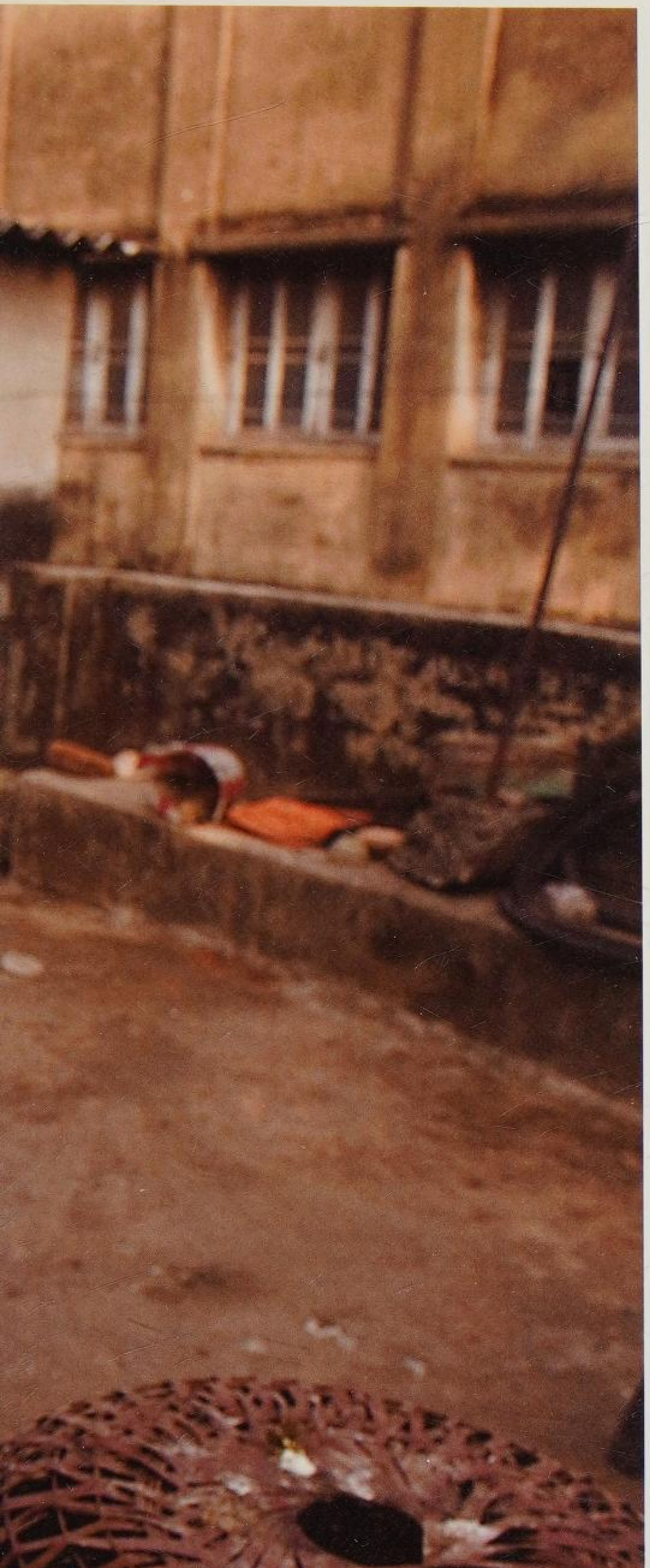
Stella, owner of a Chinese provision store, Sun Yat Sen Street. Following doublespread: Stella at home.

財源廣進
萬事如意

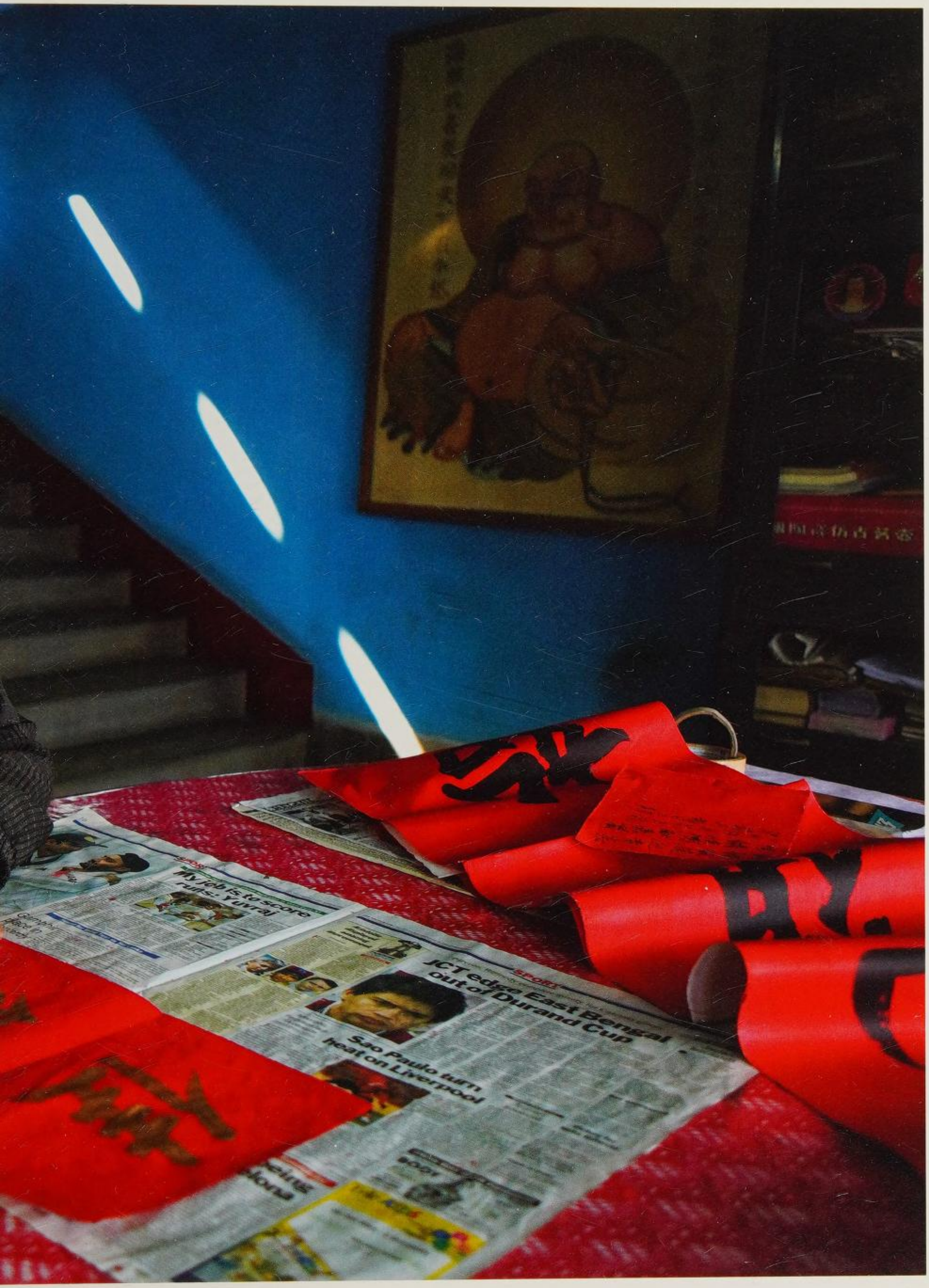
福
福
STAR CALENDAR CO.

Above left and right: handwriting the daily newspaper in Tangra.

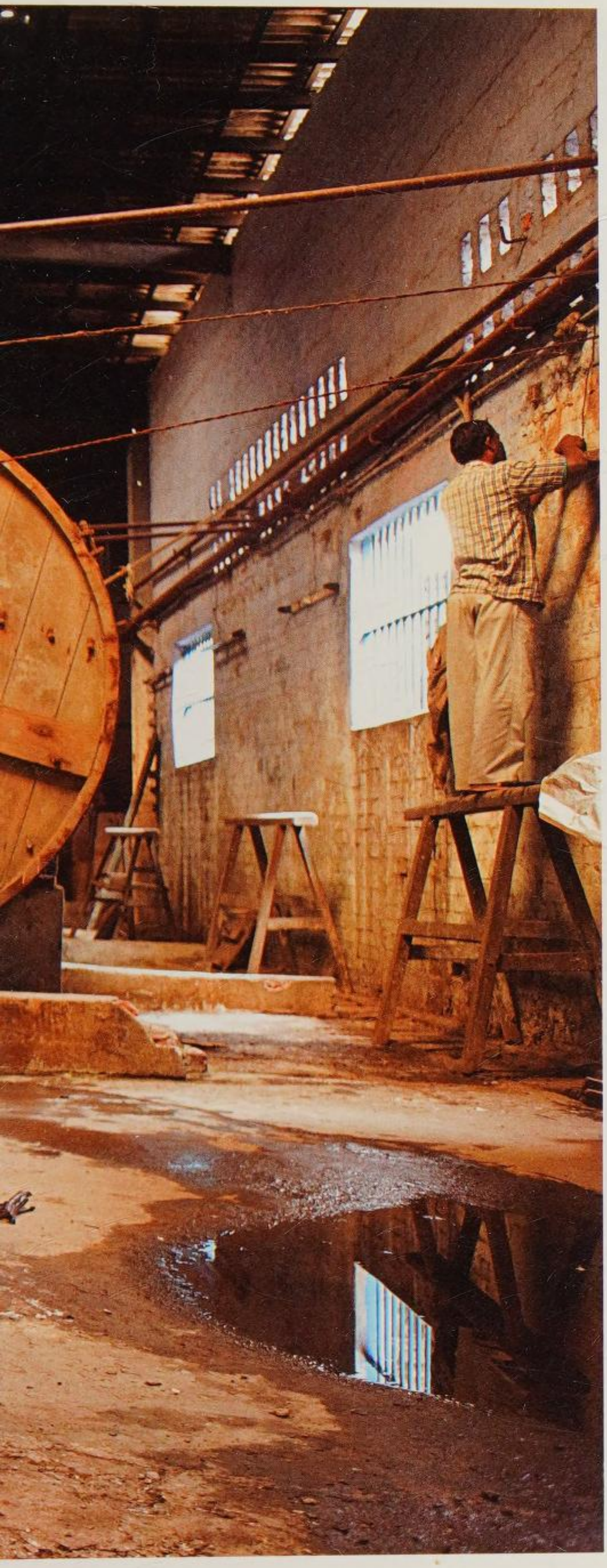
Shoe shop owner and trainer of fighting cocks.



Tangra's resident feng-shui expert.


My job is to score runs: Yuvraj
JCT edge East Bengal out of Durand Cup
Sao Paulo turn heat on Liverpool

Owner of a tannery, now closed, in Tangra.



Entrance to a community club.

RIGHTS OF ADMISSION
RESERVED
P-74

Sunday afternoon at a club.

總理遺囑

余致力國民革命凡四十年其
目的在求中國之自由平等積
四十年之經驗深知欲達到此
目的必須喚起民衆及聯合世
界上以平等待我之民族共同
奮鬥

現在革命尚未成功凡我同志
務須依照余所著建國方略建
國大綱三民主義及第一次全
國代表大會宣言繼續努力以
求貫澈最近主張開國民會議
及廢除不平等條約尤須於最
短期間促其實現是所至囑

Playing mahjong.

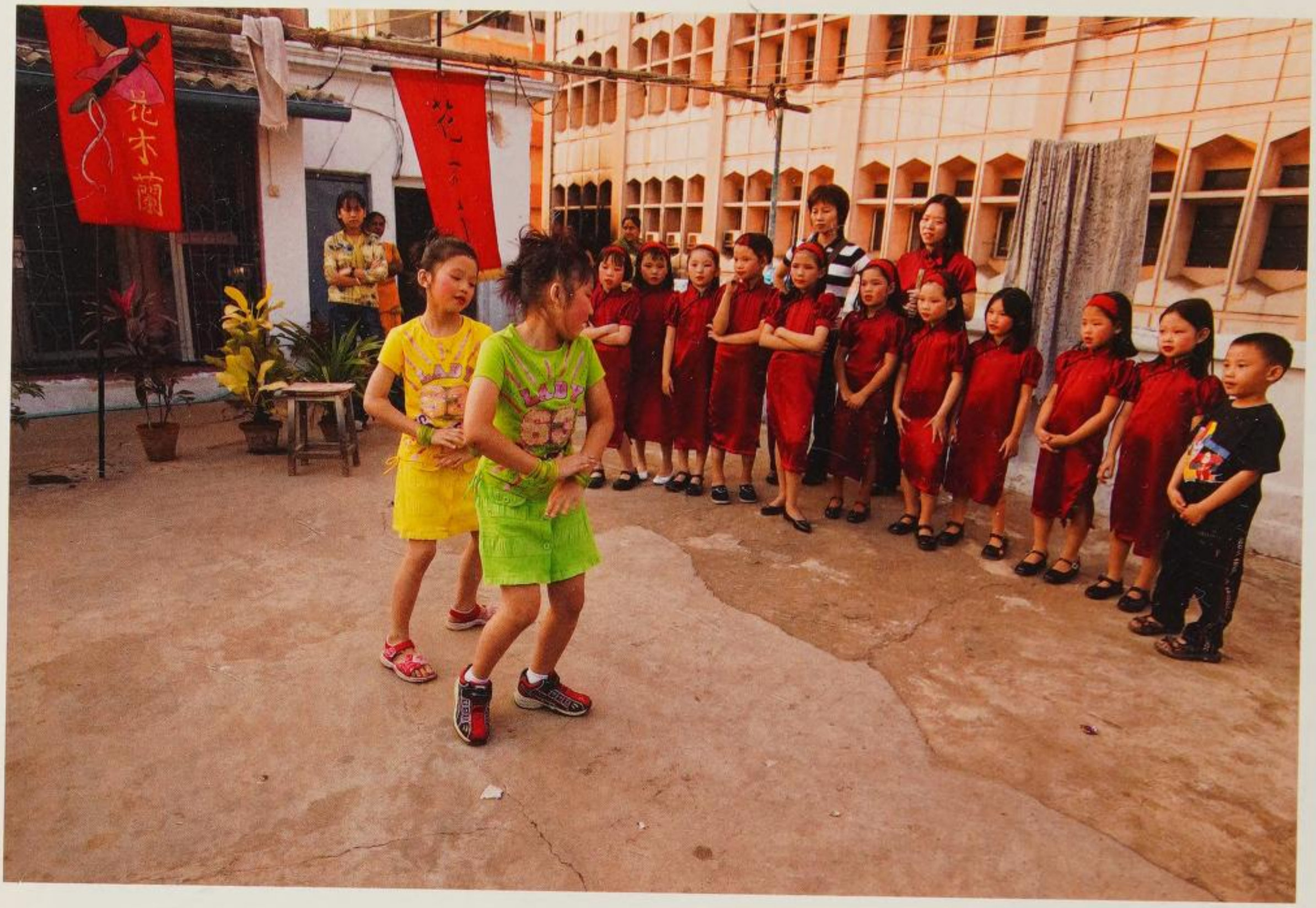
A predominantly Cantonese club.

Watch out, New Year's around the corner.

A Chinese laundry owner prepares for New Year.

A restaurant in Tangra gets a fresh coat of red.

Time to buy salad leaves for the dragons and flowers for the home.

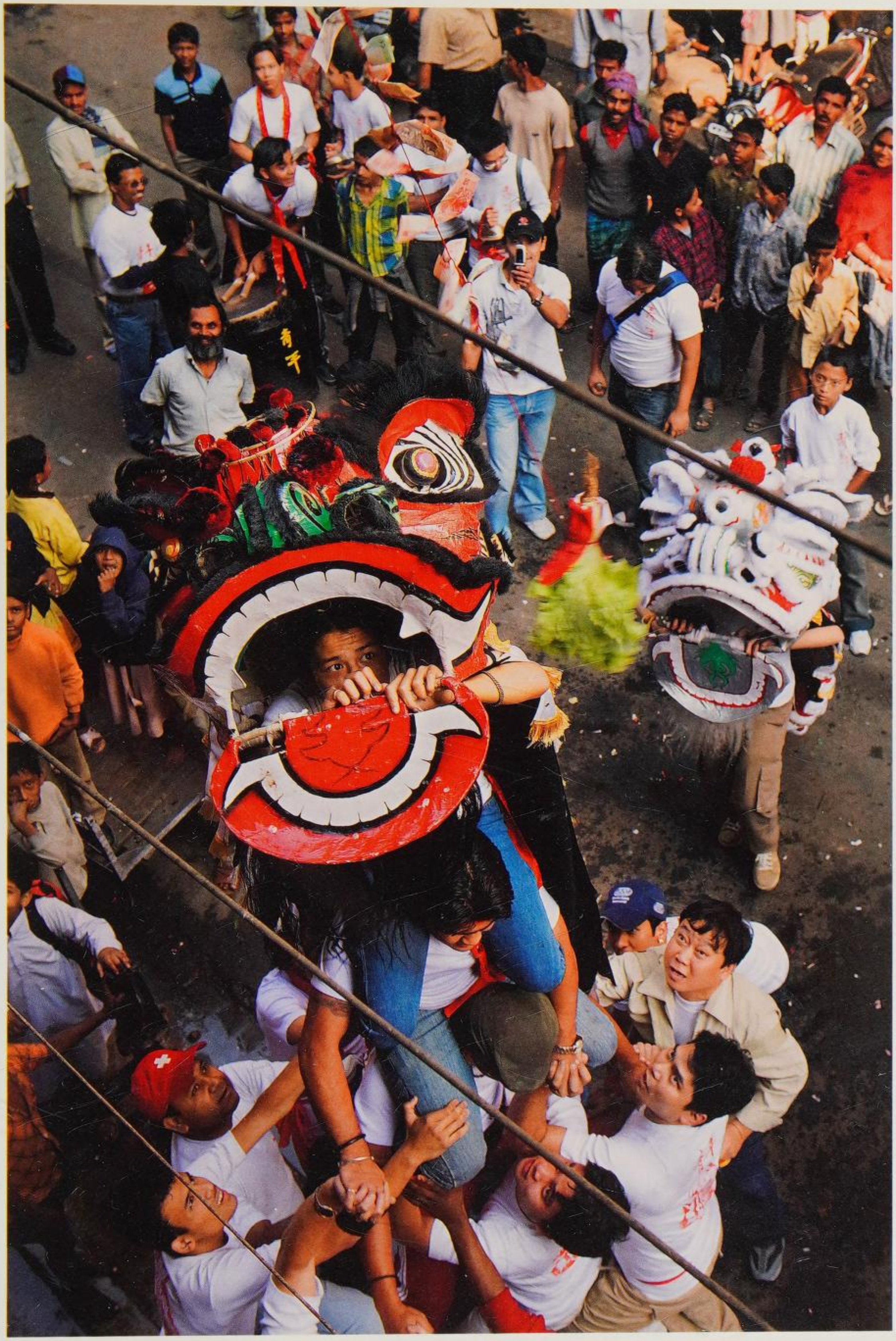


Rehearsing for Chinese New Year.

Marching off to the parade.

Sunday before New Year in Tiretti Bazaar. Following doublespread: time for the dragons to emerge.

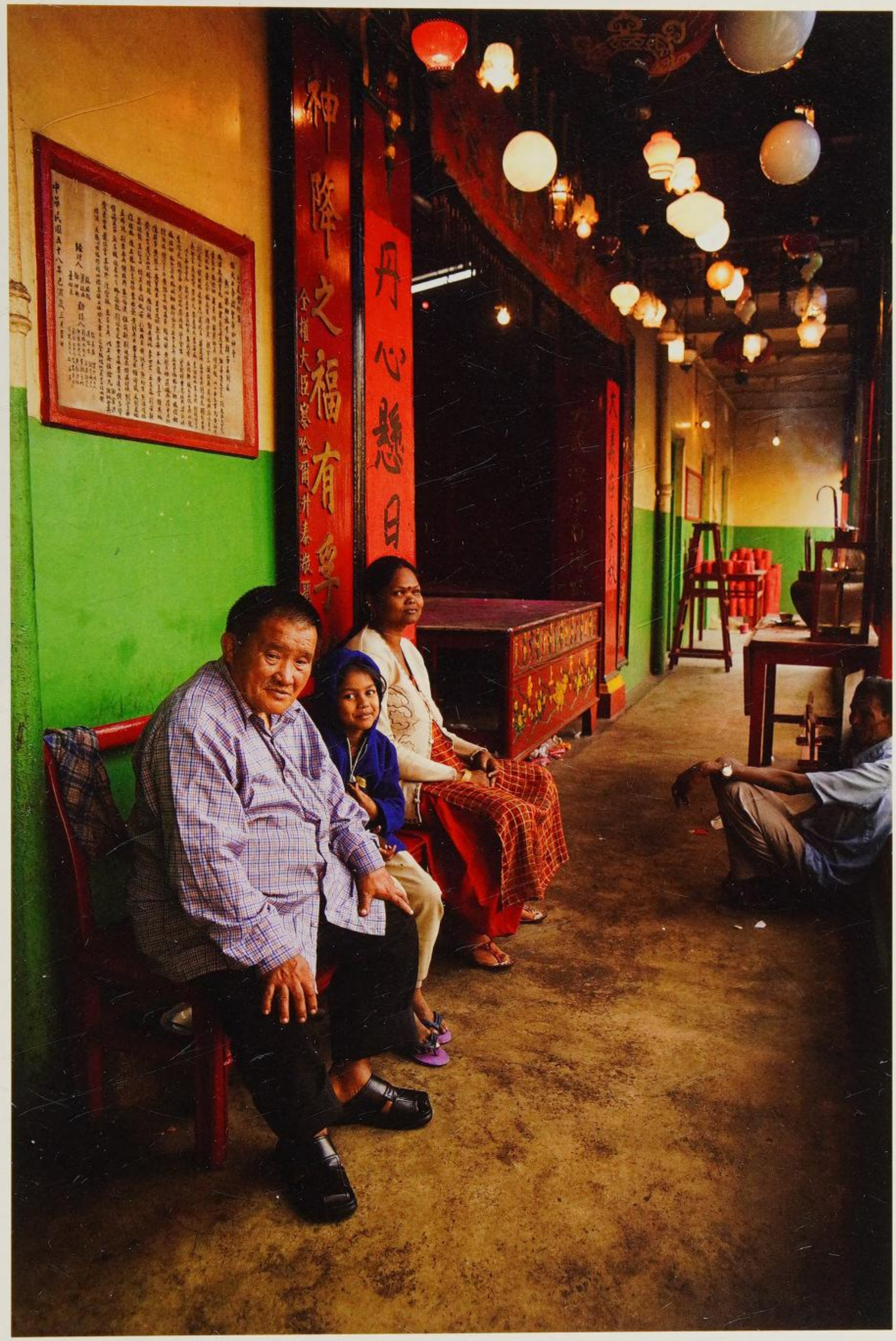
Dressed up to greet the dragons.



Gotcha! Almost. Salad leaves and gifts of cash.

Thirsty dragons vying for cold beer! Following doublespread: a dragon dance group makes its presence felt.

Entrance to a large Chinese temple near the Esplanade.



Caretakers of the temple from Kolkata's melting 'wok'!

Temple in Chattawalla Gully.

A prayer for the New Year.

Bridesmaid at a Chinese wedding in Tangra.

Time for a family picture.

A star is born, a handsome new addition to a shrinking community!

About the author

An award-winning advertising and editorial photographer, Rafeeq Ellias has won over 40 national and international awards for his advertising and photographic work. Rafeeq has also shot three documentaries, including "The Legend of Fat Mama" for BBC World on the Chinese community in Kolkata. The film won two National Awards from the President of India; Best Short Film at the MIFF 2006; runner-up at the Asian Broadcast Awards. The film has been screened extensively at festivals in Delhi, Kolkata, Kathmandu, New York, Toronto, Manchester, Barcelona and Oslo, among other cities. Rafeeq's other passion is photographing ballet and opera which he has been shooting for over 10 years in Moscow, Novosibirsk, Budapest, Tashkent, Moldova and Bucharest.

Cover: Chinese New Year, a still from the BBC World film *The Legend of Fat Mama* on the Chinese community in Kolkata

About the book

Kolkata's Chinese community is one of India's tiniest minorities. This is a book about their lives, their joys and their struggle to retain their identity, as they coexist with other communities in Kolkata's melting 'wok'. Their numbers however continue to diminish ever since they began migrating to other countries in the aftermath of the India China war in 1962, when they faced considerable hardship, including internment and deportation. This book is a small tribute to an industrious, vibrant community ... and to the magical diversity of India at its best.

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